

chapter 6

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

What to Leave the Next Generation

Introduction

Now comes the good part: thinking about the future—in fact, dreaming a bit about the future. You’ve done much of the hard part, having collected and sifted through a lot of information and described problems, issues, and opportunities as clearly as possible. All of that is a strong dose of reality, and a great foundation for what comes next.

Here you don’t want to lose touch with reality, but you want to unchain yourself from it long enough to ask: where does the community WANT to be 10, 20, or even 30 years from now? How should children and seniors be able to move around the community? What kind of transportation network should be available to businesses and commuters? What’s the collective vision? What are your goals? Goals, after all, are the desire side of problems –turning a problem inside out and imagining a future where it is solved.

A “vision” is an essential part of a transportation plan, but something different from the rest of it. The difference between the vision and the rest of the plan has been described like this:

The vision is a dream.	The plan is the blueprint
The vision describes.	The plan analyzes.
The vision is poetry.	The plan is prose.
The vision is about possibilities.	The plan is about policies.
The vision describes what.	The plan shows how.
The vision is an aspiration.	The plan is a legal document.
The vision appeals to imagination.	The plan appeals to reason.
The vision is striven for.	The plan is implemented.

This nice tête-à-tête is from the State Planning Office’s [*Community Visioning Handbook*](#). That handbook is your complete guide to lead the community through the process of imagining the future -- and how to do so in a way that balances reality with justifiable aspirations.

The *Community Visioning Handbook* suggests several tools to help people express their desired future. Here, we put (what else?) a transportation twist on the tools. These may be tools you are already using as part of the overall comprehensive planning process, in which case you can simply make the transportation system one of the building blocks of the overall plan.

THREE GOOD “VISIONING” TOOLS

The Build-out Map

A build-out map helps to visualize answers to questions like: Where would you put all the projected growth over the next 20 years in a way that preserves the special places of the Town, that expands the tax base and contributes to jobs in the region, and that doesn't put a strain on transportation, police, fire, emergency and other services? In this vision of the future, how are homes, job centers, schools, and stores and services connected? Does this vision have room for choice in transportation?

A build-out map is a visual representation of the future distribution of development across the community. It often starts not with the ideal situation, but with the most likely situation: what would the town look like if existing patterns (such as mapped in Figure 6-1 in Woolwich as of 2005) were to continue without change in policies or market conditions? The results can be eye opening; they can also motivate a vision of the future. That future might show, for example, how the 4“D”s – distance, density, diversity of land uses, and design--might be arranged so your community will evolve into a place with transportation choices, employment centers, and open space.

A build-out mapping exercise requires preparation that often is part of a larger comprehensive planning process. This includes a base map that shows parcels, existing development and roads, and a companion “opportunities and constraints” map with environmental and other limitations, such as wetlands, poor soils, steep slopes, conservation and institutional ownership, and the like. The build-out process is described more fully in chapter 12 of [*Comprehensive Planning: a Manual for Maine Communities*](#).

Visual Preference Photographs

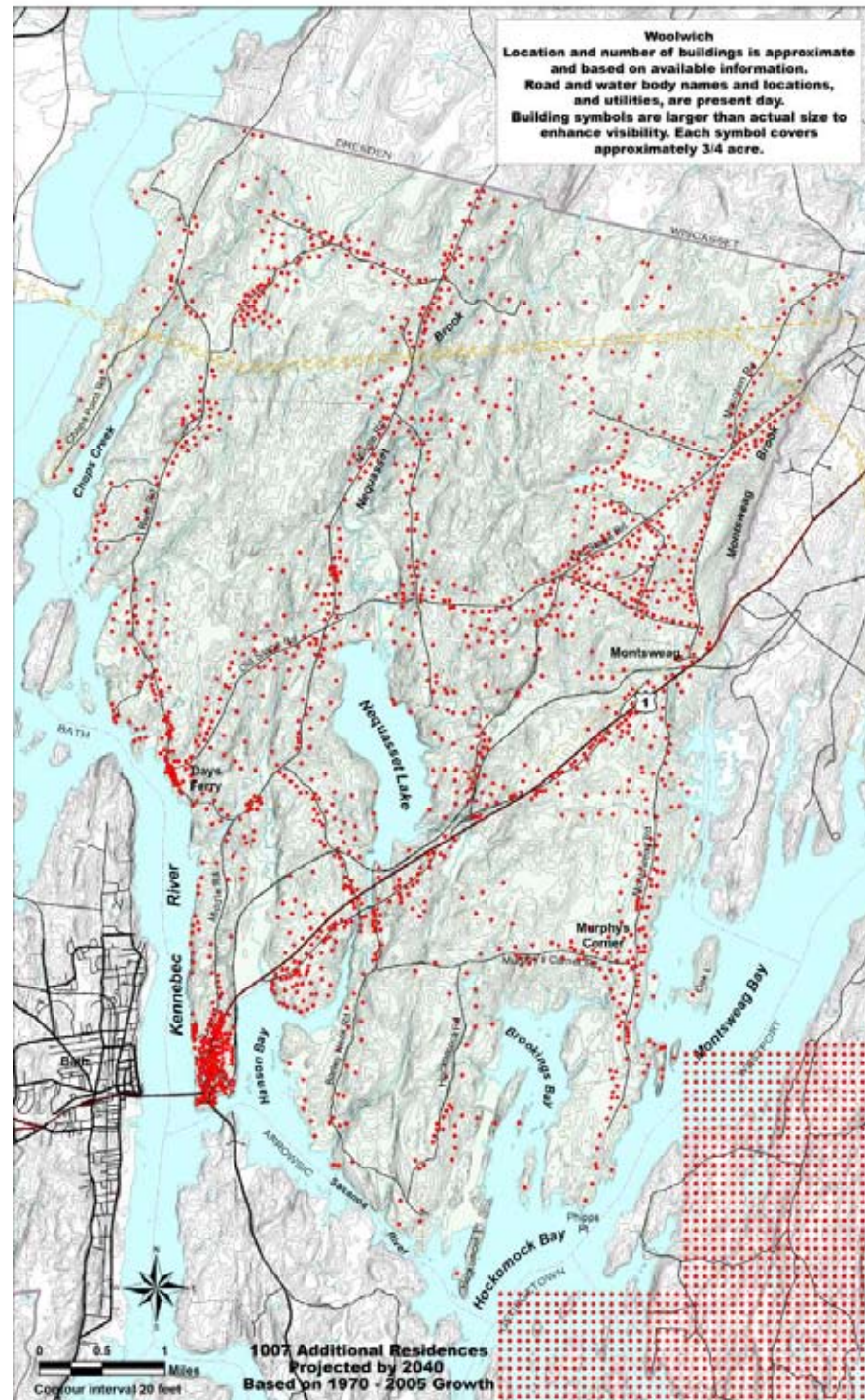
Sometimes the best way to envision a desired future is to look closely at what you like best about the past. And a good way to do that is through photography. Arm volunteers with disposable cameras and ask each to photograph his or her favorite places to walk, bicycle, and drive. The reasons might be a scenic vista, the aesthetic quality of a street, the arrangement, character, and types of buildings along a street, the open spaces, the economic activity along a corridor or the bustle of a downtown, or the “gateway” feel of a place. Organize the photos into similar categories and, as a group or as part of a public workshop, analyze what makes these places rise to the top of people's preferences. And think about whether some of those favorites might be able to be preserved or replicated in years to come; some of the strategies in Appendix B provide tips on how to do this.

2005 (1654 Buildings)

Figure 6-1
Envisioning the future through
a build-out map

In 2005 Woolwich had 1,654 buildings located as shown on this map. Based on long-term growth trends, another 1,000 or so residences – represented by the red dots in the lower corner (each dot scaled to about $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre)--could be expected over 35 years. How might the Town envision the location of this development to best meet quality of life, economic, and transportation goals?

Map prepared by Robert Faunce and Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association.



Livable Local Streets

This exercise extends the idea of identifying what people might like best about the existing living environment, with a focus at the neighborhood or local street level. As with visual preference photography, a very useful exercise is to ask the committee or members of the community to identify the local streets that are the very best in Town or a neighboring town. These might be in-town or suburban neighborhood streets, rural lanes, or country roads – just make sure they are streets or roads with homes along them.

Once a sample has been identified, grab a partner and a tape measure and go to the streets and start measuring. What is the width of the street? Is there a sidewalk, and if so, what are its dimensions? How far back are homes set back from pavement? What is the typical distance between homes? How many stories does the typical home have? How large are the lots (from tax map information)? How far is it from one intersection to the next? Do trees line the street or are they common in front yards, and if so, typically how tall are they? What you are doing is uncovering the dimensions that make the streets so attractive to people.

Those who have gone through this exercise in the past have sometimes found that the most appealing local streets have the character of an “outdoor room.” The elements of the street are organized so that the walls of the buildings and the canopies of large trees form the walls and ceiling of the outdoor room, and the “floor” of the room includes elements like a planting strip (esplanade) and sidewalk, as well as a street that is not overly wide. The dimensions of the “outdoor room” can be translated later into zoning and subdivision language for new development. See Figure 6-2.

BEFORE MOVING ON TO SOLUTIONS

If the vision is a bit of a dream, it also is the backdrop for the goals and policies that will form the backbone of the transportation plan. Before moving on to solutions, take time to translate the vision into a series of goals – statements of where the community wants to be in 5 to 10 years with respect to the different elements of the vision. Whereas the vision statement is overarching, the goals are at one greater level of detail: still general but targeted at the key components of transportation-land use systems. They state the community’s desire for:

- Safe and efficient operations of arterial and collector roads
- Safety and quality of life in neighborhoods
- Choice in transportation (for different population groups, to promote tourism, for walking and bicycling)
- The economic viability of downtowns
- The optimal accommodations for parking, balancing business, aesthetic, and environmental considerations
- Taking advantage of regional transportation facilities – highway interchanges, rail, airports, seaports – for economic development

- The community's quality of place (including scenic qualities, historic and cultural features, rural lands)
- The use and expansion of the transportation network in a way that protects the natural environment
- Regional cooperation to meet corridor-wide needs

As always, do not be limited by these – use your judgment, based on local knowledge and the results of the inventories and analyses, to set goals that meet your community's needs.

Now, on to solutions.

Figure 6-2.
Taking the
measure of things

